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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001155

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SUBJECT: PRO-GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION PARTIES ACHIEVE
PARTIAL UNITY

REF: CARACAS 1062

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The opposition reached agreement on consensus gubernatorial candidates in 19 of 22 races by August 12, the last day for the registration of gubernatorial and mayoral candidates. Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) enjoys the consensus support of smaller pro-government parties for its gubernatorial candidates in only 11 states so far. However, the PSUV is better positioned than opposition parties to win many state and local elections on its own. The Supreme Court upheld a three-year residency requirement for potential candidates in a court case that disqualifies strong opposition mayoral candidates in two important cities. Although leaders in both the government and opposition believe November's elections are key electoral contests, both sides continue to have trouble forging consensus with their allies and achieving unity among fractious and ambitious local leaders. End Summary.

Opposition Reaches Partial Agreement

¶2. (C) Opposition parties announced consensus candidacies in 19 of 22 gubernatorial races and 154 of 328 mayoral races on August 12, the final day the National Electoral Council accepted the registration of candidates for the November 23 elections. The Comptroller barred the opposition's best candidate for the Caracas mayorship and the opposition's best gubernatorial candidates in three states from running based on administrative sanctions. The opposition intends to use polls to settle the remaining internal disputes in the states of Bolivar, Tachira, and Yaracuy. Opposition leaders believe they can win in both Bolivar and Tachira, but will likely lose in both gubernatorial races if they do not reach agreement on consensus candidates. The opposition is unlikely to win Yaracuy State, but is divided over whether or not to support former Yaracuy governor and political prisoner Eduardo Lappi, who is living in Peru after escaping from jail in 2007.

¶3. (C) Opposition leaders are accenting the positive and suggest that they will be able to resolve almost all remaining internal divisions before election day. Nevertheless, the local media is focusing on emblematic mayoral races in which the opposition continues to squabble openly. For example, the opposition has not agreed on a

consensus candidate for the Caracas mayorship or for mayoral races in three of Caracas' five boroughs. In the Chacao borough, Mayor Leopoldo Lopez is backing a councilman's candidacy over the candidate of his Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party, setting up what is widely perceived as an open conflict between Lopez and Zulia Governor and 2006 consensus opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales. The opposition so far has consensus mayoral candidates in only six state capitals.

¶4. (C) The lack of greater opposition consensus at the municipal level may be a reflection of ongoing political tactics. Consensus opposition gubernatorial candidate in Carabobo State Henrique Salas Feo told poloff that his small party has not yet decided which of his small party's three candidates should get the nod for the mayoral race in Valencia. Salas Feo explained that in the run-up to that decision, he can expect to enjoy all three mayoral pre-candidates' full support for his gubernatorial run. Once he selects from among the three, he expects the losers will be far less engaged in supporting his candidacy.

¶5. (C) In addition, there appear to be serious differences between newer opposition parties, like UNT and Primero Justicia (PJ), and the older parties that dominated Venezuelan politics before Chavez, Democratic Action (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI). UNT and PJ generally enjoy broader support in public opinion polls than their older rivals (albeit still in the single digits), but lack nation-wide party structures. Conversely, AD and COPEI maintain residual party structures in many areas where UNT and PJ have yet to develop party structures. AD and COPEI appear poised to secure a disproportionate number of consensus candidates for their parties, even though UNT and PJ may be able to generate more public support.

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Patriotic Alliance Stumbles

¶6. (C) Despite more recent efforts to placate small pro-Chavez parties (Reftel), the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) continues to forge ahead with its own candidates in the state and local elections. So far, the Patriotic Alliance between the PSUV and parties like Patria Para Todos (PPT) and the Communist Party (PCV) have agreed on only 11 consensus pro-government candidates and 77 mayorships, all PSUV candidates. Smaller pro-Chavez parties like PPT and PCV are together supporting non-PSUV candidates in four gubernatorial races. The PSUV declined to support the PSUV governor for reelection in Carabobo State, but he registered to run as an independent.

¶7. (C) PSUV Vice President Alberto Muller Rojas boasted to the local media August 13 that the PSUV enjoys over 50 percent support across the country. He maintains that PSUV victories depend on the party's ability to mobilize its base on election day, and not on electoral alliances with small pro-government parties. According to local polls, the PSUV, despite its internal differences and organization problems, is by far the strongest political party in Venezuela. Nevertheless, the PSUV's predecessor party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), won eight gubernatorial elections in 2004 by small margins that required the support of smaller pro-government parties.

New BVR Measures

¶8. (C) In addition, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a PSUV petition to bar two opposition candidates from running for mayor in Valencia, Carabobo State, and Cabimas, Zulia State. The Supreme Court upheld a requirement that

candidates be voting residents for at least three years before running for office in those areas. Both candidates are appealing the decision. Former Vice President Jorge Rodriguez and former Minister of the Presidency Jessie Chacon quickly denied the ruling applied to them. They are running for the mayorships of the Caracas boroughs of Libertador and Sucre, respectively, but reside in other boroughs. Vice President of the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court Luis Martinez Hernandez told Poloff August 14 that he believes the ruling does not apply to Rodriguez and Chacon. He said candidates are eligible to run in boroughs other than the ones they reside in, so long as they are in the same municipality.

¶9. (C) The CNE extended the registration period for state legislative assembly candidates until August 14. CNE President Tibisay Lucena explained to the media that the CNE extended the deadline because not many persons registered for these lower profile races. The CNE decision conveniently gave pro-government parties 48 more hours to try to reach consensus state legislature candidates in the 12 states in which they had not yet been able to do so. PSUV Vice President Muller Rojas also told the media that he sees no conflict of interest in the fact that Communications and Information Minister Andres Izarra will help run the PSUV's media strategy for the November elections. Izarra later "clarified" that he would have only an informal advisory role.

Comment

¶10. (C) While both pro-government and opposition politicians readily agree that the upcoming November state and local elections will be a crucial electoral test, neither side has succeeded in achieving the unity they had hoped for by the close of candidate registration. Many opposition politicians continue to put their personal and party interests first, particularly in areas in which they have the best chance of winning. Moreover, the Comptroller declared ineligible some of its best candidates in key races, and these candidates have so far refrained from publicly supporting alternate candidates. At the same time, President Chavez has so far been unsuccessful in imposing his slate of PSUV candidates on smaller pro-government parties. While small pro-government parties do not enjoy much political support on their own,

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they may be crucial in close races.

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